

**Ash Wednesday C'19**

**6 March 2019**

**Joel 2.1-2, 12-17; Ps. 103.8-14**

**II Cor. 5.20b-6.10; Mt.6.1-6, 16-21**

**St. Luke's Episcopal Church**

**North Little Rock, Arkansas**

*As a Father cares for his children, so does the Lord care for those who fear him. for he himself knows that we are but dust. Amen.*

Mardi gras, Fat Tuesday, or Shrove Tuesday as we Episcopalians call it, is over.

The masks and beads, riotous music, revelry, the eating of sausage, bacon, pancakes and other fatty foods has ended. For years I must confess I never saw the value of having Shrove Tuesday in our Church calendar, what holy purpose could it possibly serve – I thought. Why does the Church Year allow this brief almost pagan pause before lent – just so we can let loose and blow off some steam?!

I believe there is some deep wisdom here for us, for the revelry and masks of Shrove Tuesday confronts us with the fact that we all have dark and shadowy sides – the parts of ourselves that don't care much for morality - the parts of ourselves and of life that are scary and make us feel out of control – the parts we try to hide or pretend doesn't exist.

Shrove Tuesday also reminds us of the paradox that these disowned parts are somehow holy and blessed by God and are to somehow have their place in our

conscious lives. If Shrove Tuesday confronts our shadow then Ash Wednesday takes it a step further by confronting us with our mortality, for each of us our days are numbered.

Many of us were saddened by a tragic and unexpected reminder of our mortality a few nights ago when tornadoes ripped through Alabama leaving a path of destruction in its wake with over 20 people dead. We mourn for the families of all those who lost their lives.

During this season of lent we will be confronted with our origins, the paradox that we've been born into life marked by both original sin and by original blessing!

How each of us have been created from the dust of the earth in God's own image, that we each bear the very image of God – stamped on our souls.

This is indeed our true selves; but somehow, rather than honor this we mortals left to our own vices and devices seek to live out of a false self. The masks of Shrove Tuesday are symbols of these false selves that we have learned to project to the world around us. And why wouldn't we? We learned from an early age that in order to get along with our family first and later the world at large; we had to conform to a prescribed role. Behind the masks we fear that our true self would be rejected – we say things to ourselves like: *'if people knew me for who I really am they wouldn't have anything more to do with me'*.

Living out of this false self is what the bible calls sin. Our catechism in the BCP defines sin as, *“the seeking of our own will instead of the will of God, thus distorting our relationship with God, with other people, and with all creation.”* (BCP p.848)

Since we were never intended to live out of the false self we develop all kinds of ways of coping, many of them not so healthy. God desires for us to live out of our true selves that unique one of a kind person that God created!

During this season of lent we talk more than usual about spiritual disciplines like prayer and fasting, self-denial, spiritual reading and meditation, just to name a few. It's not for nothing that these disciplines have been handed down to us over the centuries. The saints have always known that these disciplines are the vehicles that place us in a position where God can more easily transform our lives. The Transformation of lives that is to be our purpose as the church to allow Christ to transform us more and more into that divine image we were created to bear.

This is the freedom that we all are seeking to finally be comfortable in our own skins, living the lives we were created to live in the image of God. So today on this Ash Wednesday, we begin the Lenten journey marking our foreheads in the sign of the cross with dust; the paradoxical symbol of both our composition of and our decomposition.

Today we acknowledge all the parts of ourselves, our vices as well as our virtues; we acknowledge our need of God and return from the seeking of our own will and yield to God's will. As we do, we will receive grace and courage to drop the masks of our false selves, and we will be transformed into that true self, the self that God intended from the beginning for us to be. John Henry Newman the great theologian said it best,

*“Fear not that your life should come to an end but rather, fear that it should never have a beginning.” Amen.*